

## MARYLAND

# New Day-Laborer Site Hung Up in Montgomery

## Decision Is Up to Gaithersburg, County Says

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A week after plans for a day-laborer center in Gaithersburg stalled, Montgomery County officials said they are still committed to financing such a facility but are waiting for city officials to make the next move.

City leaders, though, declined to say yesterday whether they intend to proceed with the project. Instead, Gaithersburg Mayor Sidney A. Katz said he will ask the City Council on Monday to set up a committee to resolve the matter.

"We're taking it one step at a time," Katz said. "I think we are committed to solving a concern, and I think we need to let that committee decide how to solve that concern."

His remarks came a day after a community meeting that drew more than 80 people and brought out some of the anti-immigrant sentiment that characterized this summer's debate over a similar proposal in Herndon.

"You may be nice people, you may be hard-working people, but frankly, there are tens of millions of people trying to get into the United States," said Brad Botwin, a Derwood resident who was handing out fliers Tuesday night for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a national group that opposes illegal immigration. "Why are we spending tax dollars to help people who have cut in line?"

Such comments, fueled by talk radio and

anti-immigration groups, threatened to derail the Herndon proposal and could affect the Montgomery project.

"Herndon, I have no doubt, will make some people gun-shy," said County Council member Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty).

Gaithersburg and county officials decided over the summer to run the county's third day-laborer center — a place where people could seek work and learn English — out of a building on North Frederick Avenue off Route 355. Dozens of day laborers, many of them undocumented, had been gathering each morning a few blocks away at a parking lot next to Grace United Methodist Church. The county signed the lease, and the city agreed to renovate the building.

But the county scuttled those plans last week when the city appeared to retreat from its commitment amid neighborhood opposition and the need for more extensive renovations than anticipated.

Yesterday, Montgomery's chief administrative officer, Bruce Romer, said city officials have not responded to a letter he sent Friday notifying them of the decision.

"The logical next step is for us to hear in some official way from the city of Gaithersburg how they would like to proceed, or if they want to proceed, and we'll act accordingly," Romer said. "We'd like to hear from the city."

County Council President Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring) said he believes that those who oppose the center for ideological rea-



BY LOIS RAIMONDO — THE WASHINGTON POST

**Day laborers converge on a contractor looking to hire in the parking lot of Grace United Methodist Church. A plan for a new site for laborers in Gaithersburg has hit roadblocks.**

sions are mostly outsiders. The county recently opened a day-laborer center in Wheaton without community opposition, and has run one in Silver Spring for a decade.

"I think Gaithersburg is fundamentally a progressive community just like the rest of the county," Perez said. "I'm confident in the end the question will be where to locate it, not whether to locate it."

Many of the city's residents who opposed placing the center on North Frederick Avenue said they did not object to the concept but preferred to put the facility in a commercial area rather than a residential neighborhood. They also argued that the city had not included them in the decision-making process.

Discussions began about a year ago,

when a committee comprising city, church and other community leaders was formed. Although the meetings were open to the public, Katz now acknowledges that they were not adequately publicized. "I can sincerely say I did not intend to make such an error, but I did," Katz told the audience.

Katz said yesterday that he did not know how many people would serve on a new committee or how they would be chosen.

Gustavo Torres, executive director of Casa de Maryland, the Silver Spring-based immigrant advocacy group that runs the county's other day-laborer centers, said he was disappointed but eager to move on.

"Now we pretty much need to start from the beginning because the mayor made a mistake. That's the reality," he said. "But we need to fix this problem."